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ABSTRACT

This informal study of the religious uses of television, based on direct on-site discussions with religious television producers, was undertaken in order to provide a broader base of understanding of current developments in the field, and to assess the viability of a television broadcast ministry for the United Methodist Church. Discussions with producers touched on their general philosophy, methods, production processes, media outlets, pattern for content determination, and financing techniques; a visit of the production facilities was usually involved as well. Contacts in the U.S. included the Franciscan Communications Center, Hour of Power, Oral Roberts Evangelistic Association, Paulist Productions, Seventh Day Adventist Radio-Television-Film Center, and the Southern Baptist Radio-Television Commission. In addition, a number of major Christian media centers in Europe which are involved in religious television were visited. Discussion includes observations on religious television programming in Europe and how it compares to programming in the U.S., major trends in religious TV programming in the U.S., and issues which should be addressed by planners if the church is to enter the television field with an effective program. (JEG)

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AN INFORMAL REVIEW OF CERTAIN CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS USES OF TELEVISION: A report on a Sabbatical Study Project

by

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AN INFORMAL REVIEW OF CERTAIN CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS USES OF TELEVISION

A Report on a Sabbatical Study Project

Curtis A. Chambers

Religious broadcasting in the United States today appears to be like a crazy quilt with no consistent pattern or coherent organization. We Americans cherish our freedom of religion but in the open market of the broadcast world it unfortunately manifests itself as a cacophany of sound and blurring of images that too often confuses rather than enlightens. The quality of programming in the electronic media varies widely--especially in radio--and the significance of the content fluctuates wildly.

In this milieu we behold the rise of the "electronic church" with many independent evangelists purchasing nearly all of the religious time available on broadcasting stations and developing multi-million dollar operations at the very moment that ecumenical broadcasting involving the mainline denominations is fading from the scene. All across the country, network affiliates are dropping programs such as those produced by the Communication Commission of the National Council of Churches in order to sell time to independent religious broadcasters. In the electronic age, religious personalities who have used the electronic media have become national personalities--appearing on TV talk shows, being quoted by the press, associating with the heads of our government, influencing national events. Meanwhile, mainline churches seem to lack identifiable personalities, appearing to the public as faceless, colorless bureaucracies--aloof from the common concerns and experiences of persons in everyday walks of life.

These are some of the circumstances that influenced me to choose the religious uses of television for a theme for my sabbatical study leave. Also bearing upon this choice were the following factors: (1) The general interest in our society in the "electronic church" development. A cover story in Time, major articles in Newsweek, The Wall Street Journal and other national periodicals, and concerned coverage by the television industry itself evidence a need for a serious survey of contemporary religious broadcasting. (2) Interest in use of the electronic media by The United Methodist Church. The Mass Communications Fund authorized by the last General Conference and surveys of concerns of church members and leaders in the comprehensive communication system study this quadrennium confirm a significant interest of United Methodists in having a church presence in the electronic media. (3) Development of a broadcast station ownership proposal. The fact that this idea is receiving serious study requires a realistic appraisal of what is taking place in religious broadcasting and its potential use for United Methodists. (4) A personal sense of need to supplement and expand my own experience. While I have been involved in religious broadcasting in one way or another for nearly thirty years, my primary media work has been print-oriented, and to a lesser extent with film. Thus for me a firsthand encounter with persons and organizations now active in religious broadcasting seemed to be essential in order to provide a broader base of understanding for developments in the field today.

The basic approach followed in the study was to seek direct on-site discussions with religious television producers. Subjects of these face-to-face discussions included their general philosophy, methods, production processes, media outlets,

pattern for content determination and financing techniques. Usually this involved a visit of production facilities as well. The contacts in the United States included the following:

Franciscan Communications Center, Los Angeles, California -- This Catholic organization produces a variety of media for the church, but it is best known for its production of creative radio and television spot announcements which are placed on public service time.

Hour of Power, Robert Schuller, Garden Grove Community Church, California -- This program follows a traditional worship service format, with embellishments, and is led by a colorful minister of a Reformed Church congregation. Thus it tends to have more denominational rapport than most of the independent religious productions.

Oral Roberts Evangelistic Association, Tulsa, Oklahoma -- Here is an example of an independent evangelist who has built a strong organization and large institutions related to his media ministry.

Paulist Productions, Pacific Palisades, California -- Father Elwood "Bud" Kieser is the dynamic head of this Catholic media production organization. Its major television work is in a program called "Insight" featuring well-known Hollywood stars in dramatic episodes which point up moral and spiritual values.

Seventh Day Adventist Radio-Television-Film Center, Thousand Oaks, California -- This is a multi-million dollar facility recently built on the beautiful rolling hills northwest of Los Angeles to house common production facilities and offices for three major Adventist productions: The radio "Voice of Prophecy," now 50 years old; "Faith for Today," a TV dramatic series; and "It Is Written," an illustrated TV lecture-sermon series.

Southern Baptist Radio-Television Commission, Fort Worth, Texas -- This visit provided a look at a denominational approach to electronic media in a variety of forms both in radio and television. The Southern Baptists have an outstanding physical production facility for radio and television as well as an able professional and technical staff.

In addition to these American contacts, Dr. Hans Florin, General Secretary of the World Association for Christian Communication, was kind enough to arrange a month-long itinerary for me in Europe to assure me the opportunity to visit a number of major Christian media centers where significant work in religious television is taking place. These contacts included the following: London, England--Dr. Colin Morris at the British Broadcasting Corporation and Christopher Martin at the Independent Broadcast Authority; Hilversum, Holland--Paul Hollaar and Willem Hekhuis at the Nederlandse Christelijke Radio Vereniging and Dr. J. Greven of IKON (Protestant church-affiliated television association); Munich, Germany--Christian Hoffman of EIKON and Murri Selle of WACC Europe; Cologne, Germany--Dr. Dietrich P. Winterbert of Westdeutscher Rundfunk Köln; Hamburg, Germany--Karen Willms of Evangelisches Missionswerk; Stockholm, Sweden--Gertrud Brundin and Gunnar Hollingberg of Sveriges Radio (Swedish Broadcasting Corporation).

In Stockholm along with nearly 200 European television producers I attended the International Christian Television Week sponsored by WACC and UNDA. About 50 European television programs produced during the last two years were entered in the final competition. The Swedish Broadcasting Corporation served as host for the event. I had the honor to be asked to serve on the jury of seven media specialists who awarded the prizes for the best entries. This afforded me an unusual opportunity to view critically with knowledgeable television specialists the best European religious television productions and to exchange insights and perspectives in a serious evaluation process. I gained a view of European religious television in this weeklong experience which normally might have taken many months and considerable travel to secure.

My observation of religious television programming in Europe is that it tends to be predominantly documentary in nature. Occasionally it includes the broadcasting of worship services. Only rarely are any elements of entertainment injected into religious programs. Thus the productions are largely descriptive, being in-depth, factual presentations of religious themes, often related to persons, places and things. The productions are non-commercial since broadcast time is never sold to religious groups. Religious television producers are generally from the government-related broadcast industry or from some church-related organization which has developed a reputation in the industry for productions that are widely representative, non-parochial, and non-proselyting.

While the European religious television productions are very professional in technical quality, they tend to be slow-paced by U.S. standards. Because most European countries offer a very limited number of channels (often 2 or 3) and there is little or no commercial television, it is possible for these detailed religious documentaries to gain a larger audience in Europe than in America where the intense competition for audience ratings creates a climate favoring programming which "grabs" audience more immediately. Thus religious television in Europe may be seen much more as educational (descriptive about religion) rather than evangelical, that is calling for religious commitment.

Among the more significant observations from reviewing the total religious media scene and from my visits and interviews in the USA with major religious television producers, I find the following tendencies:

1. American religious television productions are predominantly evangelical in approach and theology. The major objective for the programs seems to be to win converts to the faith as interpreted by the program producers.

2. A centralized authority directs the total operation. Usually the minister who is the "star" or central personality of the program itself also has complete control of the organization producing the program. He/she serves both as chief business manager and as major talent.

3. The organization developed around the television program begins to develop a corporate structure and institutional forms which often resemble (and in some instances have become) a denomination. Thus publishing enterprises may be established, magazines may be produced and distributed, missionaries may be commissioned and sent, colleges may be founded, world relief ministries may be carried on, etc.--all in the name of the broadcast. (An example of this phenomenon is Herbert Armstrong's Worldwide Church of God which grew out of his radio broadcast, "The World Tomorrow.") Appeals for funding these causes on the broadcasts are combined with appeals for support of that particular broadcast work.

4. The broadcast organizations are very sophisticated in their business methods and in their use of direct mail techniques to elicit and to follow up on correspondence from their audiences. They carefully conduct market surveys and tailor their programming product for their particular audiences. They know the value of promotion and they spend money to publicize and promote productions as well as to produce them. For example, when a Billy Graham or an Oral Roberts television special is on the air in your community you will usually see an attractive newspaper ad on the special some time before the program is aired.

5. The program style often makes use of a "show biz" format. The variety show approach is frequently utilized with appearances of guest stars who are interviewed first and who later perform their entertainment specialties. Some programs use the talk show format a la Johnny Carson (for example the 700 Club or the PTL programs). Other religious programs use various entertainment elements combined with a segment of the production featuring a sermon by the central personality. There are exceptions such as "The Hour of Power." This basically is a church worship service with congregational singing, choirs, Scripture, prayers, and with Robert Schuller preaching.

6. Most of the religious programming in major markets is commercial, that is, it is on paid time. Furthermore, most of it is scheduled in the Sunday morning "ghetto" timeslots. Time for these programs on Sunday mornings is sold commercially by individual stations and thus very frequently commercial religious programming preempts the religious programs provided by the networks on public service (free) time. Notable exceptions to the glut of Sunday morning scheduling include specials produced by World Vision, Billy Graham, or Oral Roberts which often are aired on weekdays in prime time.

7. The programs generally have a non-denominational approach. One producer of a major program told me that if he chose to do so he could establish major worshipping congregations all across the country, but, he added, these congregations would be made up of persons from Roman Catholic and Protestant churches of every description. This underscores the idea that the more successful independent television religious figures tend to attract a following from many parts of the religious spectrum.

8. Many of the religious television programs handle major amounts of money. Christian television programs purchase more than one-half billion dollars' worth of air time annually. Multi-million dollar budgets are not uncommon for many of the independent religious television productions. While many producers are scrupulously careful in their financial affairs and make public audits of their income and expenses, there are a few organizations which seem to get into financial difficulties on a continuing basis. This has caused some independent religious broadcasters themselves to call for a common system of audit and an independent endorsing authority for broadcasters who comply with specified standards of ethics in financial matters. In an article in the February 3, 1979 issue of Saturday Review the following figures were given for the 1976 proceeds of the best-known organizations:

Church of God	$65 million
Christian Broadcast Network	$58 million
Billy Graham Evangelistic Association	$38 million
Thomas Road Baptist Church	$32.5 million

Praise the Lord Club	$25 million
Garden Grove Community Church	$10.9 million
Oral Roberts Evangelistic Association	not available

It is estimated that the income of the Oral Roberts Evangelistic Association stands at over $80 million annually.

9. There is a danger of making religious messages overly simplistic in seeking to communicate to vast numbers of persons through the mass medium of television. Some religious television programs also sound an unfortunate note of triumphalism through their electronic messages. Too often, the impression is given that only this particular religious speaker has the answer, only this particular program proclaims the truth. Such statements betray a very narrow sense of truth and error. They also feed a paranoia exhibited in sometimes veiled inferences that "they" are trying to get religious programming off the air. The audience is urged to support a particular religious program to thwart the "conspiracy" to curtail our freedom of speech and exercise of religious liberty. Certainly religious freedom must be vigorously defended, but it is self serving for any religious broadcaster to equate preservation of a particular program with the total cause of defending free speech and religious liberty.

10. While not every religious television broadcaster emphasizes the need for money during broadcast time, many of them do solicit audience mail which in turn produces revenue. A number of broadcasters make such a strong "pitch" to raise money that it becomes objectionable. In these instances, funds are sought in order to secure more television time in order to appear on more stations in order to buy more time to appear on more stations to raise more money to buy more time. This kind of circular reasoning makes the raising of funds to perpetuate a broadcast appear to be an end in itself.

11. Mainline denominations are becoming virtually invisible in the media generally, while independent and evangelical Christian communications activities are expanding with explosive force. In the USA 1,300 radio stations--one out of every seven--are Christian-owned and have a potential audience of 150 million people. A new religious radio station is established every week and a new Christian-owned television station is added every month. The Christian Broadcasting System owns and operates a satellite earth station with uplinks to both the RCA Satcom and the Westar satellites, plus a chain of sixty earth stations across the country with a program service for 3,000 cable systems. CBN's "700 Club" is on 150 television stations and on 4,000 cable systems. Meanwhile, fewer and fewer television stations are carrying the network religious programs in which denominations participate through the National Council of Churches. Mainline churches are slowly fading from view on the television screens in the modern American home.

These are a number of reflections on American religious television as it exists today. In spite of the problem areas described, I believe that there are implications for a worthwhile television broadcast ministry for The United Methodist Church in the observations listed above. But there are numbers of issues which must be resolved before the church can effectively enter the television field. Among the critical issues are these:

1. The United Methodist Church must have clear objectives for any television ministry it may seek to develop. Are its purposes to evangelize? to educate?

to project a United Methodist image? to gain converts? to strengthen local churches? to raise funds for special causes? to stimulate counseling follow-up opportunities? to gain a foothold in the television industry? or a combination of some of the above?

2. The church must determine what type or programming it wishes to present. It will demand all our skills in developing church productions which are sophisticated and creative in content and production techniques and which will secure audience attention, yet will be theologically/educationally sound.

3. The church must be willing to commit major dollars if it hopes to engage in any significant television ministry. Production costs for one special of 1-hour length could be as much as $500,000. The purchase of prime time on strategic stations across the country could cost another $500,000 to $1,000,000. Denominations which recently have put that kind of money into television specials include the Church of the Nazarene and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (the Mormons). Is The United Methodist Church ready to find a way to commit major dollars to a television ministry?

4. The issue of personalities must be resolved. The United Methodist Church has tended to play down personalities in media rather than to develop them. To what extent is the church willing to permit programming to be developed around a personality or personalities which might become as identifiable with The United Methodist Church as Bishop Fulton J. Sheen was with the Roman Catholic Church?

5. The church needs to resolve whether fund raising should take place through the television programming it produces and, if so, how and for what causes. I believe that funding can be sought tastefully and effectively through the public media for humanitarian rather than for parochial causes. But such appeals must be done creatively and in excellent taste. The Roman Catholic spot announcements are an important part of raising nearly $50 million dollars annually in their churches for their relief and rehabilitation work called the Campaign for Human Development.

6. The church must resolve its own ambivalence concerning television. It is viewed by many church people as primarily an entertainment medium and by some as an enemy to the faith. Others see it as a threat in that it substitutes the "electronic church" for the person-to-person contact of the local church congregation. Others see it as a useful but only minor means of communicating the church's message and do not take it seriously. Still others are startled by the frightening economics of the industry and throw up their hands in despair at the thought of the church's ever having any significant role in television.

If a person from overseas came to America and turned on the television on a Sunday morning, what would his/her impression be of the religious life of America. It would be confused, to say the least. There are millions of Americans who are growing up in our society with the same unclear perspective on what the church is all about. They are ignorant about the meaning of Christian faith and have little contact with the religious community except through television. Many of us are dissatisfied with the imcomplete image of the church which current American religious television reveals. Unless we move to correct that incomplete picture of the church and of Christian life our church will continue to become a diminishing force in our society as well as in the lives of generations to come.

My sabbatical study leave experience has helped me view the problems as well as the possibilities of religious television ministry. As a result I believe that it is both possible and urgently desirable for The United Methodist Church aggressively and effectively to enter the field of religious television broadcasting. There is no denomination which has a wider potential support system in the field with churches in every county of the U.S.A. There is no denomination which is more representative of the total population of the nation. The United Methodist Church has the resources in persons and in its theological heritage to convey meaningful witness to the generation of today through the most pervasive medium of our time--television. The economic requirements appear to be staggering, but the alternative is to abdicate responsibility in this vitally influential area of American life. I believe that there are ways the church can mobilize, find the resources, and move to have an influence and to let its light shine in a confused and commercially-dominated medium reflective of the society in which it exists.

10/29/79